SIPAZ: Peace Journalism in Rural Colombia

Violence has taken a devastating toll on Colombian culture and society. SIPAZ is part of a grassroots movement to counter the culture of violence. (CIDA Photo: Ellen Tolmie)

2001-11-16

Angela Castellanos

Decades of guerrilla campaigns, military counterstrikes, and the relentless war on the drug trade have taken a devastating toll on Colombian culture and society. In response to this attack on the country's social and cultural environment, a group of Colombian social organizations and community radio stations united to form SIPAZ — Sistema de Comunicación para la Paz (Communication System for Peace). With the help of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), SIPAZ has created a communications network and system that is helping to restore the social fabric in areas of conflict, particularly in the rural regions of Colombia.

For example, in Belén de los Andaquíes — the only municipality in the province of Caquetá whose economy is not based on cocaine cultivation — the creation of a community radio station helped reinforced Belén's identity as a municipality committed to planting food crops rather than cocaine. Although it was the target of guerrilla attacks last August, the station continues programing and its children's radio school was awarded UNICEF's prize for Children's Programing in Latin America.

"The conflict Colombia is experiencing will not end soon. So, we suggested forming a strong network to disseminate news and information that would strengthen civil society and social organizations. This, in turn, would contribute to rebuilding the country after the war," explains Mauricio Beltrán, Director of the Fundación Multicolor, one of the organizations participating in SIPAZ. The Foundation also acts as the project's administrative host.

Working toward a culture of peace

SIPAZ's goal is to encourage stations in its network to produce and exchange news that will foster a culture of peace, tolerance, and respect for nature. From a hub of 10 centres linking 42 community radio stations and two local television stations, SIPAZ produces a news program. All the stations contribute news and other materials. The program is then channelled through the 10 centres and sent, via the Internet, to all the participating stations and partners around the country.

Although SIPAZ operates in areas where violence is particularly intense, it has chosen not to cover conflict and violent incidents. Covering such events, it feels, would greatly endanger the lives of its members, and there is sufficient mass media coverage of these in the country. SIPAZ does, however, report on the aftermath and consequences of these conflicts and their wider social context. Stations have learned how to turn local events and activities that support community development into news items of regional interest, as a result of news management training workshops. SIPAZ-affiliated stations have compiled news management guidelines in a style manual — a communications tool linking programing to social processes. Eventually, SIPAZ hopes to generate news for a national audience.

"We are working to improve the quality and quantity of news production so as to increase the number of participating stations. This would also strengthen the stations so that they can once again launch their community's dreams," says Mauricio Beltrán, director of the project centre in Bogota. "And if these communities don't have any dreams because they only live to plant cocaine, we hope to help them generate new dreams and aspirations."

Some community radio stations have tried to realize their dreams. Among them, Radio Ocaína Stéreo stands out. Its director, Alcídes Jiménez, was the parish priest for Puerto Caycedo, a remote municipality in a province with a large guerrilla presence. Father Alcídes' dream was to declare five municipalities within Putumayo as a Territory of Peace, where no rebel groups would be allowed to operate. However, the dream was marred by violence. On September 11, 1999 Father Alcídes was assassinated while celebrating communion at a mass dedicated to declaring the area a Territory of Peace.

"Father Alcídes taught us a lot," remembers Beltrán wistfully. "He often said that those who produce cocaine produce death; those that produce food, produce life."

The roots of change

SIPAZ grew out of the realization that community radio stations (most of which are in rural areas) were losing their identity as they competed with their commercial counterparts. A working group comprised of seven radio stations came together to discuss this issue. They looked at the unique role that community radio stations could play in determining content, and in administering and monitoring radio stations. The working group led to the establishment of SIPAZ and their deliberations to the production of a Community Radio Station Manual, *Manual de Emisoras Comunitarias*.

SIPAZ then focused on determining how programing could be developed, based on local aspirations and culture, to promote life and peace. Using participatory techniques, researchers developed a methodology for identifying and documenting local cultural practices that could help develop culturally relevant programming. For example, they examined means communication in the diverse cultural environments in which the community radio stations operate. The handbook they produced (*Cartilla de Comunicación Ambiental*) not only recognizes Colombia's rich cultural diversity, but it also acknowledges that this diversity is being destroyed by drug trafficking and war.

The challenge ahead

The SIPAZ experiment is being replicated across Colombia. For example, the Asociación Desarrollo Campesino (Association for Rural Development — ADC), an organization affiliated with SIPAZ, has organized training in natural resource management. This training is now being

adapted by the municipality of Carmen de Bolívar, where the SIPAZ news program is carried by the local television station.

The ADC also developed a workshop on managing natural reserves, based on a rural initiative aimed at conserving the forests in the southwestern region of Laguna de la Cocha — a region with a guerrilla presence. It now serves as a national and international model. Despite such progress, however, violence is ever present: Eusberto Jojoa, an association rural leader who consolidated 60 natural reserves and established environmental alternatives to cocaine and war, was recently assassinated.

Future plans for SIPAZ include expanding its network and improving technology exchanges among organizations engaged in similar work. SIPAZ would move beyond providing basic information and communication technology training to its members, to enabling social organizations to generate knowledge from basic news information — much as the community radio stations have transformed local events into news stories that resonate among neighbouring communities. This would contribute to the construction of "knowledge societies," a step forward along Colombia's entry into the knowledge and information age.

Angela Castellanos is a communications consultant and international correspondent based in Colombia.

For more information:

Mauricio Beltran, Fundacion Colombia Multicolor; Email: multicol@colnodo.apc.org